212.5
Prelina
158258

THE

ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY

Town Hall, Bombay.

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018

H.S. Olcott
46

PHLET SERIES NO. 5.

ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

OF THE

PRESIDENT-FOUNDER

OF THE

THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY.

DELIVERED AT MOTT MEMORIAL HALL,
NEW YORK CITY,
AT THE FIRST REGULAR MEETING OF THE SOCIETY,
NOVEMBER 17TH, 1875.

00158258

MADRAS:
THE "THEOSOPHIST" OFFICE, ADYAR.

BENARES AND LONDON:
THE THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING SOCIETY.

ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY
Presented by:
Shri Nalin Mehta.
Date 2/7/73

"HONEST LABOUR BEARS A LOVELY FACE."

COL. H. S. OLCOTT.

PRESIDENT-FOUNDER, THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY.

Born 1832. **Died 1907.**

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE T.S.

[DELIVERED AT MOTT MEMORIAL HALL, IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK, AT THE FIRST REGULAR MEETING OF THE SOCIETY, NOVEMBER 17TH, 1875.]

In future times, when the impartial historian shall write an account of the progress of religious ideas in the present century, the formation of this Theosophical Society, whose first meeting under its formal declaration of principles we are now attending, will not pass unnoticed. This much is certain. The bare announcement of the intended inauguration of such a movement attracted attention, and caused no little discussion in the secular as well as the religious press. It has sounded in the ears of some of the leaders of the contending forces of theology and science, like the distant blast of a trumpet to the struggling armies in a battle. The note is faint as yet, and indicates neither the strength nor purposes of the body approaching. For either side, it may mean a reinforcement that will help turn the tide of victory; it may herald only the gathering of neutrals to watch events; or it may threaten the discomfiture and disarmament of both antagonists.

From what little has been said in its behalf, it is not yet clear to the public how this "new departure" should be regarded. Neither church nor college knows whether to adopt a policy of denunciation, misrepresentation, contumely, or amity. By some secular journals it is patronizingly encouraged as likely to "enliven a prosaic age with exhibitions of mediæval tricks of sorcery," while others denounce it as the forerunner of a relapse into "the worst forms of fetishism." The spiritualists began, a few weeks ago, with voluminous and angry protests against its promoters, as seeking to supplant the prevalent democratic relations with the other world by an aristocratic esoterism, and even now, while they seem to be watching our next move with the greatest interest, their press teems with defamatory criticisms. Neither of the religious sects has definitely committed itself, although our preliminary advances have been noticed in a guarded way in some of their organs.

Such being the state of the case at the very onset of our movement, before one blow has been struck, am I not warranted in repeating the statement that in the coming time it is inevitable that the birth of this Society of ours must be considered as a factor in the problem which the historian will be required to solve?

The present small number of its members is not to be considered at all in judging of its probable career. Eighteen hundred and seventy odd years ago, the whole Christian Church could be contained within a

Galilean fisherman's hut, and yet it now embraces one hundred and twenty millions of people within its communion ; and twelve centuries ago, the only believer in Islâmism, which now counts two hundred and fifty million devotees, bestrode a camel and dreamed dreams.

No, it is not a question of numbers how great an effect this Society will have upon religious thought—I will go further, and say, upon the science and philosophy—of the age : great events sometimes come from far more modest beginnings. I need not occupy time in quoting examples which will occur to every one of you in corroboration of my point. Nor is it a question of endowment funds and income any more than one of numerous members : the propagandist disciples sent out by Jesus went barefoot, ill-clothed, and without purse or scrip.

What is it then, which makes me say what in deepest seriousness and a full knowledge of its truth I have said ? What is it that makes me not only content but proud to stand for the brief moment as the mouth-piece and figure-head of this movement, risking abuse, misrepresentation, and every vile assault ? It is the fact that in my soul I feel that behind us, behind our little band, behind our feeble, new-born organization, there gathers a MIGHTY POWER that nothing can withstand—the power of TRUTH ! Because I feel that we are only the advance-guard, holding the pass until the main body shall come up. Because I feel that we are enlisted in a holy cause, and that truth, now as always, is

mighty and will prevail. Because I see around us a multitude of people of many different creeds worshipping, through sheer ignorance, shams and effete superstitions, and who are only waiting to be shown the audacity and dishonesty of their spiritual guides to call them to account, and begin to think for themselves. Because I feel, as a sincere theosophist, that we shall be able to give to science such evidences of the truth of the ancient philosophy and the comprehensiveness of ancient science, that her drift towards atheism will be arrested, and our chemists will, as Madame Blavatsky expresses it, "set to work to learn a new alphabet of Science on the lap of Mother Nature."

As a believer in Theosophy, theoretical and practical, I personally am confident that this Society will be the means of furnishing such unanswerable proofs of the immortality of the soul, that none but fools will doubt. I believe that the time will come when men will be as ashamed of ever having advocated athesim in any of its forms, as, thirty years hence, they will be of ever having owned a slave or countenanced human slavery.

Look back the few, the very few, years to the time when William Lloyd Garrison was led through Boston streets with a rope around his neck. Compare that with the present state of the Slavery Question, and then tell me what may *not* a few earnest, determined, unselfish persons do. Why, in 1859, I myself went, at the risk of my life, to report for the New-York *Tribune* the hanging of John Brown ; and in 1857, while I was

visiting Senator Hammond, of South Carolina, solely in my character of a student of scientific agriculture, and having nothing whatever to do with politics, an Augusta paper advised my commission to jail because I wrote for the *Tribune*, although only upon agriculture. Having passed through such experiences, and seen so complete a reversal of conditions within the space of less than a score of years, I feel that neither I nor this Society incurs any great danger by displaying a little moral courage in so good a cause. Let the future take care of itself; it is for us to so shape the present as to make it beget what we desire and what will bring honor upon us. If we are true to each other and true to ourselves, we shall surmount every obstacle, vanquish every foe, and attain what we are all in search of, the peace of mind which comes of absolute knowledge. If we are divided, irresolute, temporising, jesuitical, we shall fail as a society to do what is now clearly within our reach; and future years will doubtless see us bewailing the loss of such a golden opportunity as comes to few persons in a succession of centuries.

But if this Society were to dissolve within one year, we should not have lived in vain. To-day is our own; to-morrow may be; but yesterday is gone forever. In the economy of nature, an impulse, however slight, once given to matter, is eternal; and an act once performed, its consequences, be they great or small, must be worked out sooner or later. The passing caprice of a woman has changed the destiny of nations;

the speaking of a word in the mountains may bring a crushing avalanche upon the hamlet that lies at their feet; the turning of a man's footsteps to the right or left, to avoid a stone, or chase a butterfly, or gratify it matters not what idle whim, may alter his whole life, and, directly or indirectly, result in momentous consequences to a world.

About us we see the people struggling blindly to emancipate their thought from ecclesiastical despotism —without seeing more than a faint glimmer of light in the whole black horizon of their religious ideas. They struggle from an irrepressible desire to be free from shackles which bind their limping reason after their volant intuitions have outgrown them. Upon the one side, the philosophical chemists invite them to an apotheosis of matter; upon the other, the spiritualists fling open the painted doors of their "angel world." The clergy hold them back and hiss warnings and anathemas in their ears. They waver, uncertain which way to go. Heirs to the spiritual longings of the race, they shrink back from the prospect of annihilation, which, in their own case, when life's burden presses heavily, may not always seem unwelcome, but which was never meant for those near and dear ones who have died in their youth and purity, and left behind a sweet fragrance when the alabaster box was broken and they passed behind the Veil of Isis.

But when they turn to Spiritualism for comfort and conviction, they encounter such a barrier of

imposture, tricky mediums, lying spirits, and revolting social theories, that they recoil with loathing; secretly lamenting the necessity which compels them to do it. They count among their acquaintance, perhaps, many persons of irreproachable character who can testify to the identification of departed friends and count themselves spiritualists; but they see these very friends attending their churches as before, abstaining from spiritualist meetings, and taking the spiritualist papers secretly. When they ask why this is so, the universal reply is that so many immoral people have fastened upon the cause, and mediums are being so constantly detected in trickery, that it is almost disreputable to be an open and avowed Spiritualist. The organs of the class apologize for cheating mediums, demanding that sceptics shall overlook the nine instances of fraud and consider the one genuine phenomenon; forgetting that it requires blunt nerves and a strong purpose to dig to the bottom of a muck-heap for the chance of finding something of value there.

The protestant sects begin with the fatal assumption that an infallible and inspired Bible will bear the test of reason, and so forecast their own doom; for the analytical power of reason is bounded only by the limits of ascertained truth, and fresh discoveries are daily made among the remains of antiquity, which attack the very foundations upon which the whole scheme of Christianity is based. The most audacious explorers in science are recruits from protestantism;

that would-be mistress of our conscience is stabbed by her own children. The Catholic Church having erected a theocracy upon the ruins of ancient faiths, and stolen not only their allegories but their very exoteric symbolism and revamped them for her own use, is gathering her forces for the struggle that she knows too well is close at hand, and that will be mortal. Enraged at the progress of the age, which has extinguished her penal fires, destroyed her torture-chambers, blunted her axe, and made it impossible for her to re-bathe her hands in human blood, she is working silently, cunningly, and with intense eagerness to regain her lost supremacy. What this under-current is we may see in the disgraceful Orange Riot of 1872; the recent conviction of poor Leymarie, in Paris; and the affair of Guibord, in Montreal, whose body has just been buried in a ton of Portland cement and under the escort of thirteen hundred armed police, infantry and artillery, to protect it from the rage of the catholics, because Guibord belonged to a society which admitted liberal books into its library! We may also see the secret machinations of the church in the perversions to its communion; the establishment of schools, colleges, convents, monasteries; the schemes to Romanize a portion of our common schools; the building of costly cathedrals; and the erection of parishes into bishoprics, and bishoprics into archiepiscopal sees.

Upon what does this church or any other ecclesiast-

ical hierarchy stand, but upon the congenital longing of man for an immortal existence; the obscurity of our view of the other world by reason of intervening matter; and the urgency of material wants, which oblige us to accept the intervention of a select class of spiritual guides and expounders, or go without spiritual nourishment other than such as we can pick up beside the dusty road along which we trudge from youth to old age?

If the founders of this Society are true to themselves, they will set to work to study the religious question from the standpoint of the ancient peoples, gather together their wisdom, verify their alleged theosophic discoveries (I say *alleged*, as president of a non-committal society of investigation; as an individual, I should omit that word, and give full credit where it is due) and contribute to the common fund whatever is of common interest. If there be any who have begun without counting the cost; if there be any who think to pervert this body to sectarian or any other narrow, selfish ends; if there be any cowards, who wish to meet with us in secret and revile us in public; if there be any who begin with the hope or expectation of making everything bend to their preconceived notions, regardless of the evidence; if there be any who, in subscribing to the broad and manly principle enunciated in the by-laws, that we will discover all we can about *all* the laws of nature, do so with a mental reservation that they will back out if any pet theory, or creed, or interest

is endangered; if there be any such, I pray them, in all kindness, to withdraw now, when they can do so without hard words or hard feelings. For, if I understand the spirit of this Society, it consecrates itself to the intrepid and conscientious study of truth, and binds itself, individually as collectively, to suffer *nothing* to stand in the way. As for me—poor, weak man, honored far beyond my deserts in my election to this place of honor and of danger—I can only say that, come well, come ill, my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength are pledged to this cause, and I shall stand fast while I have a breath of life in me, though all others shall retire and leave me to stand alone. But I shall not be alone, nor will the Theosophical Society be alone. Even now branch societies are projected in this country. Our organization has been noticed in England, and I am told that an article upon the subject is about to appear in one of the greatest of the quarterlies. Whether it shall be couched in friendly or hostile spirit matters little; our protest and challenge will be announced, and we may safely leave the rest to the natural order of events.

If I rightly apprehend our work, it is to aid in freeing the public mind of theological superstition and a tame subservience to the arrogance of science. However much or little we may do, I think it would have been hardly possible to hope for anything if the work had been begun in any country which did not afford perfect political and religious liberty. It

certainly would have been useless to attempt it except in one where all religions stand alike before the law, and where religious heterodoxy works no abridgment of civil rights.

Our Society is, I may say, without precedent. From the days when the neoplatonists and the last theurgists of Alexandria were scattered by the murderous hand of Christianity, until now, the revival of a study of Theosophy has not been attempted.

There have been secret political, commercial, and industrial societies, and societies of Freemasons and their offshoots, but, even in secrecy, they have not attempted to perform the labor which lies before us and which we will do openly.

To the protestant and catholic sectaries we have to show the pagan origin of many of their most sacred idols and most cherished dogmas; to the liberal minds in science, the profound scientific attainments of the ancient magi. Society has reached a point where *something* must be done; it is for us to indicate where that something may be found.

If we would compare our organization with its archetype, where can it be found? It can not be called theurgic, for the theurgists not only believed in God, but knew Him through their knowledge of His attributes as they exist in the ASTRAL LIGHT, or, as the old world Kabbalists called it, the Matrix of the World. The theurgists had two kinds of mysteries—the *exoteric*, or public, and *esoteric*, or secret. The

exoteric comprised the working of wonderful effects at public ceremonies—among others the causing of statues to walk, talk, and prophesy. These effects were said to have been produced by natural forces in combination with the elementary spirits which lurk in the astral light. As the practice of even exoteric theurgy is dangerous it was left to the High Priests and the "Initiates of the Outer Temple." But the real esoteric mysteries were chiefly confined to the hierophants. A life of the strictest purity and self-abnegation was required for it —a life such as that of Jesus or Apollonius. Certainly the Theosophical Society can not be compared to an ancient school of theurgy, for scarcely one of its members yet suspects that the obtaining of occult knowledge requires any more sacrifices than any other branch of knowledge.

The neoplatonists formed a school of philosophy which arose in Alexandria coincidently with Christianity, and was the last public school of theurgy. It based its psychological system upon those of Pythagoras and Plato, but drew a great deal more from the primeval source of all religions, the books of Hermes and the Vedas—of Egypt and India respectively. The Jewish Kabbala colored neoplatonism no little, for real theurgy having degenerated at that time, and the few remaining adepts having sought solitude with the Essenes and in India, the neoplatonists had no longer access to the real treatises upon the Divine Science, (which were carefully collected and withdrawn to a

secret place a few days before the burning of the Alexandrian library by Julius Cæsar), and so they had to fall back upon the Kabbala of Moses and the Seventy. Neoplatonism was tinctured with both Orientalism and Occidentalism; and its expounders tried to present the elements of Theosophy and philosophy according to the primitive doctrines of the oriental prophets, in combination with poetical Platonism and the positivism of Aristotle in the form of Grecian dialectics. Their proper doctrines were: the Oriental doctrine of Emanation; the Pythagorean Number of Harmony; Plato's ideas of the creation and the separation from the world of sense.*

They believed in elementary spirits, whom they evoked and controlled—a point of especial interest to us.

We can not, of course, include ourselves among the number of American spiritualists who implicitly accept all the genuine phenomena to be produced by disembodied spirits; for while some of us unreservedly believe in the occasional return of human spirits and in the existence of true mediums, others discredit both. Moreover, of the believers, some not only admit the possibility of occult forces of nature being directed, consciously or unconsciously, by the human will for the production of startling results, but also recognize in most of the physical phenomena called spiritual, the

* See Ennemoser's "History of Magic."

agency of elementary spirits who often falsely personate persons not communing with the circles, answer the thoughts which lie visible to them—

" . . . . . as clear
As pebbles within brooks appear,"

and echo and respond to every fanciful vagary which agitates the questioner's mind.

Spiritualism proper was rife at Rome in the time of Ammianus Marcellinus, who tells us that in the days of the Emperor Valens (A.D. 371) some Greeks wishing to form a society of theurgists, were brought to trial for attempting to ascertain, through magical arts, who should succeed to the throne. They employed a small table shaped like a tripod, which was produced in court, and upon being put to the torture they confessed as follows: "We constructed this table of laurel-wood under solemn auspices. Having duly consecrated it, by pronouncing over it prayers as ordered in the treatises which we stole from a Grand Priest at Delphi, and by the use of magnetic manipulations, we succeeded in making it deliver oracles." Over the table hung suspended from the ceiling a large bronze ring, which swung hither and thither, and, striking the letters cut in the periphery of the table-top, gave lengthy communications. Valens hated Theodorus, a man of virtue, and as the swinging ring spelt out the letters T-h-e-o-d and stopped, the Emperor, to make sure that the object of his displeasure should not occupy the throne, had him put to death: but the

murder proved a useless precaution, for *Theodosius* succeeded to the purple, and the prognostication of the table turned out correct.

There is the difference between the modern spiritualistic phenomena and the effects produced by the theurgists, that whereas no reliance can apparently be placed upon the spontaneous communications of the former without corroboration, the latter cannot be untruthful, since the adepts will not permit unprogressed spirits to approach or speak.

The Mesmeric phenomena, which will of necessity invite us to careful study, were known in the most remote periods, and are described by Seneca, Martial, Plautus, and Pausanias.

We are not representatives of the school of the stoics, for "they thought the Universe to be made of matter, and to be some great animal which lives because there is nothing to interfere with it." * Moreover, Zeno's pupils taught not only that men should be free from passion and unmoved by joy or grief, but also that they should submit to the unavoidable necessity by which all things are governed; and we found this society in token of our discontent with things as they are and to endeavour to bring about something better.

Finally, we do not resemble the atomical atheists, who considered every thing a congeries of atoms, because matter can be separated into particles, and

* See Howitt's "History of the Supernatural."

that, therefore, there could be no indivisible incorporeal being, while the very title of our Society indicates that we hope to obtain knowledge of the existence of a Supreme Intelligence and of a world of spirits, by the help of physical processes.

No, we are neither of these, but simply investigators, of earnest purpose and unbiassed mind, who study all things, prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good.

Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and the neoplatonists, all worked at theurgy separately, and at their meetings imparted to each other the results of their study and experiment. Their neophytes were obliged to follow this rule with strictness; and all were bound to protect and aid every philosopher, especially every theurgist, no matter whence he came or what school he represented.

The hermetists of the Middle Ages were all neoplatonists, and learned their doctrines from them. In some respects we resemble them, and yet they had dogmas to impart, which under our by-laws we have not; and, further, they were all believers in Theosophy, while we are, with two or three exceptions, simply investigators, undertaking a task far more difficult than theirs, since we have no ready-made material for belief at our hand, but must create it for ourselves.

We are of our age, and yet some strides ahead of it, albeit some journals and pamphleteers more glib than truthful, have already charged us with being reactionists

who turn from modern light (!) to mediæval and ancient darkness! We seek, inquire, reject nothing without cause, accept nothing without proof: we are students, not teachers.

We should make ourselves familiar with the manifold powers of the human soul and test the claims for the potency of the human will. Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Od, the astral light of the ancients (now called the universal ether) and its currents—all these offer us the widest and most fascinating fields of exploration. At our semi-monthly meetings, we shall have the researches and experiments of our members and of eminent correspondents in this and other countries read for our instruction, and we shall have tests, experiments, and practical demonstrations, as occasion offers. As our funds warrant, we shall print and circulate our documents, and translate, reprint, and publish works by the great masters of Theosophy of all times.

But until our now somewhat incongruous elements are harmonized, and a common interest results from increased familiarity with our subject, I do not anticipate that at our general meetings we shall witness such theurgic phenomena as were exhibited in the ancient temples.

It is as impossible for these results to be obtained without perfect community of thought, will, and desire, as it was for Jesus to work his wonders at Nazareth because of the prevalent unbelief, or Paul

his at Athens where the populace knew how to check the subtle currents which he controlled by his will. A single very positive and unfriendly will is competent when introduced at a spiritual circle to utterly destroy the mediumistic power. If Professor Tyndall had known this law, he would not have written his nonsense to the Dialectical Society. Professor Stainton-Moses, of the University College, London, writes me that the mere entrance of such a person into the house—not even the room—has done this in his experience frequently. Mr. Crookes says that Florence Cook, his medium, has been spoiled for a season by a walk down Regent Street; each person who brushed against her depriving her of some portion of her mediumistic power. If she be in fact a medium and not an impostor, I do not doubt the possibility of this being the case. Every one who has studied mesmerism is aware that no satisfactory results can be attained without perfect accord among those engaged in the experiment or standing near by as spectators. These things being so, how can we expect that *as a society* we can have any very remarkable illustrations of the control of the adept theurgist over the subtle powers of nature?

But here is where Mr. Felt's alleged discoveries will come into play. Without claiming to be a theurgist, a mesmerist, or a spiritualist, our Vice-President promises, by simple chemical appliances, to exhibit to us, as he has to others before, the races of beings which, invisible to our eyes, people the elements. Think for a

moment of this astounding claim! Fancy the consequences of the practical demonstration of its truth, for which Mr. Felt is now preparing the requisite apparatus! What will the church say of a whole world of beings within her territory but without her jurisdiction? What will the academy say of this crushing proof of an unseen universe given by the most unimaginative of its sciences? What will the Positivists say, who have been prating of the impossibility of there being any entity which cannot be weighed in scales, filtered through funnels, tested with litmus, or carved with a scalpel? What will the spiritualists say, when through the column of saturated vapor flit the dreadful shapes of beings whom, in their blindness, they have in a thousand cases revered and babbled to as the returning shades of their relatives and friends? Alas! poor spiritualists—editors and correspondents—who have made themselves jocund over my impudence and apostasy. Alas, sleek scientists, overswollen with the wind of popular applause! The day of reckoning is close at hand, and the name of the Theosophical Society will, if Mr. Felt's experiments result favorably, hold its place in history as that of the body which first exhibited the "Elementary Spirits" in this nineteenth century of conceit and infidelity, even if it be never mentioned for any other reason.

H. S. OLCOTT.

Printed by Thompson & Co., at the Minerva Press,
Broadway Madras.

00158258

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018